

LOS VALLEY COLLEGE HISTORICAL MUSEUM ASSOCIATION MEETING
MARCH 4, 1996 SPEAKER: Catherine Mulholland

Mulholland: ...[?] of Mulholland and I'm now looking for a publisher. In the course of writing the biography I was in a sense blind-sighted by a young woman who got a contract ...[?] and to produce what the publishers call a major biography, I would rebutt that and say it ISN'T, no such thing, ...[?] but it's something that writer's have to deal with, competition and publishing and getting contracts, it's very disappointing, it's very disheartening but I'm happy to report that the men who have currently read my manuscript, one former general manager of the Department of Water and Power, a professor of Political Science down at UC San Diego and a third professor of the History Department down at CalTech are all giving me pretty good grades and have all offered to help me try and get the services of a good University publishing house to get this out and at least ...[?] one Joyce ...[?] who some of you may know as a very distinguished scholarly Southern Californian and also the editor of the Historical Society of Southern California Journal, he said to me, don't be upset by that, he said, you just wait and do a good job and then you can have the last word! (laughter) So that's what I'm looking forward to having is the last word. Actually I don't know where the title, I think Austin called it the "Real Mulholland" but I'd like to change it, woman's prerogative to change her mind, I'd like to call it "William Mulholland: Shifting Perspectives" and what I wanted to talk to you today is about how reputations of historic figures change and alter throughout history itself, throughout the passage of time, how attitudes change, and that's a problem I had to deal with in trying to tell the Mulholland story in a book. For instance, when I was a child in the 1930's in grammar school I could not have imagined a time when Christopher Columbus and Father Junipero Serra, who were then celebrated as unconditionally heroic figures, would come to be perceived as anti-heroes and pronounced as wicked exploiters of native peoples nor could I have then imagined a statement such as that made a few years ago by the very distinguished historian, (?) Henry Steele Comminger(?), that the discovery of the New World worse than a sin, it was a mistake. Quote, how much better for mankind had the American Continents remain hidden in that oblivion to which a kind nature had consigned them. Now I can understand, sometimes I feel that way too, we don't like to see things change, and U can even symphathize with such a sentiment but I also now it is really largely a product of the romantic wishful thinking and certainly a flawed verdict for history and writing history must be more than simply a kind of judgment seat from which to sit and condemn the past. When, it's reminded, that in Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologico, that God was denied the miracle of unmaking the past, but historians and biographers and journalists and movie makers have certainly not been denied the ability to edit the past and no where has this been done with more enthusiasm than in the telling of the water story of Southern California and because my

grandfather, William Mulholland, presided over the creation of a water system which changed forever the course of Southern California, he also became the focus of a controversy which has never died. Last fall, in October, I was invited, by Mayor Riordan of all people, rather surprising, to come to City Hall, to council chambers, to be at a reception for the President of Ireland, Mary Riordan, now it wasn't that, that president Mary Robinson is her name, lovely woman, now it wasn't me they were inviting, it was really the memory of my grandfather, and Riordan presented President Robinson with a medallion of the city and along with a framed photograph of the opening of the aqueduct and the famous photograph of my grandfather standing in engineering clothes along side of the surveying equipment on a tripod. Riordan described Mulholland to the president of Ireland as the most important Irishman in the history of the city and I thought that was an interesting way to be remembered (laughs) and Riordan went on to explain to President Robinson that he had brought water from a great distance and that had hence had enabled the small pueblo to grow to a great city. Now what the mayor did not mention on this ceremonial occasion was the conflict which this Irishman and his engineering feats generated. So that for most of this century our arguments and controversy have marked as well as marred his reputation. He has been both demonized and ...[?], I thought maybe we could call this demon or deity. Saint Mulholland was one epitaph that was used, derogatorily, against him, way back when they were trying to get bond issues floated for the aqueduct, that name came from Job H...[?], Job H...[?], who was running then as the candidate for, the socialist candidate, for the mayor of Los Angeles and the two men, Mulholland, the two Irishmen, H...[?]man and Mulholland engaged in some pretty wicked word slug out's in, on the campaign trail. H...[?]man by the way was a fierce enemy of the water establishment, and that's whole saga in itself which I had to go into in my book but I won't go into today. On the other hand, ...[?] about Mulholland reached its height in, I would say in, after the aqueduct had been built and ...[?], a great champion of the aqueduct and referred to Mulholland as the Moses who had brought water forth from the rock, that's pretty high for him and then John Steven ...[?] who was fellow Irishman, author and civic ...[?] once wrote, and I blush even to quote it but it's in print so I'll put it down, said that Mulholland had the strength of Sampson, the intellect of ...[?], the soul of Homer, he was the great engineer of the land of the setting sun. (laughter)

Woman: Oh wow!

Mulholland: You can't get much better than that (laughs). Well, between those two extremes I think we have to deal with reality and as this century comes to an end, cynicism and even skepticism, skepticism and even cynicism, have come to pervade much of our attitude towards, not only public figures but especially large water projects. I noted recently that a dam in Portugal had just been stopped in order to save Paleolithic wall carvings and drawings. We no longer see big water works as the,

...[?] the fervor that men did, men and women did at the turn of the century, of this century. In the American West, especially, land developers and dam builders have become popular ...[?] and certainly contemporary ...[?] constantly worn of us of our doom if we persist in the importation of water to arid lands. The late author and dedicated conservationist, Wallace ...[?], once wrote that he considered building a dam with evidence of original sin. Another political writer, Mark ...[?], has in late years made really viscious and inaccurate attacks against men like Mulholland, who he asserts, helped create, as he called, The Cadillac Desert (?), some of you may know his book, he's not a good authority on water, and he just simply fl...[?] out, I have large bones to pick with him, I've never met him but I'd love to (laughs). Have ...[?] about a lot of things he's written. Seldom, however, do these attackers or these writers come to full grips with ancient conflicts which probably have no happy solutions. Namely, where should people live, on the face of this earth and how should they use the natural resources of the earth. I believe that these irreconcilables are best ...[?] up in two quotations, one is Thoreau's statement that in wildness is man's salvation, which is immediately countered by the great railroad builder, James J. ...[?], pronouncement that land without population is a wilderness but population without land is a mob. So, ...[?] is the man how can square that circle, we will certainly ...[?] in the 21st century. Driving over here today from Chatsworth I heard about the tragic happenings in Isreal. We just seem to have terrible times living with each other and finding any kind of agreement. Well one of my prize possessions is a large pen and ink cartoon drawing which I found rolled up in the bottom of my aunt's house, in the drawer, in her house after she had died. It's a large pen and ink drawing of Mulholland about the time that the city of Los Angeles at last regained control of it's domestic water supply from the private company which had possessed it for decades and for which Mulholland had worked since 1878 and during those 20, this picture was probably around 1902, 1903, when this city was finally getting this terrible 30 year contract they'd made with the, today the buzz word ...[?], well they didn't call it ...[?] then but, the pueblo has water rights, it has rights to the Los Angeles River and that was the sole source of water for the city, the pueblo, it had been turned over to this private company, for which my grandfather had gone to work as a young Irish immigrant. Well, during his, what'd I say, his 24 years, he had advanced from a ditch tender in Griiffith Park, about where, where his fountain, that Mulholland fountain is, ...[?] and Riverside, it's where he first lived in a cabin when he went to work for the old water company. In those years he advanced then to become the manager of the whole municipal, he said later that when the city took back it's water system and they bought it back, and they bought me with it, and of course in a sense he never left until tragedy came with the failure of the St. Francis Dam. So, at the height of his career and for most his life he was the overseer and caretaker of water, for a semi arid pueblo called Los Angeles. He brought fame and some say ignomony to the city when he built the aqueduct and

delievered water ...[?] over 230 miles away, down to the city. He ultimately received an honorary engineering degree at the University of Berkley and I have that too and ...[?] in Latin says he broke the rocks and brought the river to the thirsty land. This acheivement came at a price, a very great price. He, one of his dams failed and bought an end to his career. He lived however for 7 more years and I was a child of 12 when he died and in 1935 sat with my family in the rotunda of city hall, which I thought about the other day when I met the President of Ireland and sat behind potted palms and ferns and listened to the civic leaders give their funeral orations and I remember just, Judge Scott, Joe Scott, who was also from Ireland, in this wonderful Irish Brouge, which he kept, I think almost deliberately, my grandfather pretty much shelved his somewhere along the way and just spoke pretty standard english by the time I came along, Scott with his Brouge intoned at the funeral, at the ceremony that day, words of an Irish poet, John ...[?], That a dreamer lives forever but a toiler dies in a day. And during that funeral, all that afternoon, all work stopped on the Colorado River Aqueduct for 2 minutes and all the flow of water at ...[?] Dam was shut off to the city and Bob Philips, who's an old time engineer and the son of a water department engineer happened to be working out with his dad on the desert and out in the Colorado when that silence started. And he said, here he was out on this work site with all this noisy machinery and earth moving equipment and clanging and so forth, and then he said suddenly there was this silence that when on and on, he was about 14 or 15 himself and he said it was an unforgettable experience. For me the unforgettable experience that day were the people who came and passed the funeral, the body, the remains of my grandfather that lay there ...[?] in an open casket. And the workmen, came on and on, working men, cause in those days people got dressed up a lot more than they do now and I remember one working man with a cap on, you know those old workmen's caps those fellas wore, and he stood in front of the casket and sobbed and then he moved on, and I had never seen a grown man cry before and I tell you it made a powerful impression on me and I thought, surely, I came away from that day feeling certainly that here was a man that had been loved by a lot of people in this, in his city, now in High Schohol I came to know his ...[?], I had social studies teachers who gave me books to read by Harry McWilliams, ...[?], ...[?], men who, writers who impu...[?] the man and his work on behalf of the city, some dismissed his engineering skills and chose instead to dwell on the some sinister role he played in the power making chambers of the city. These writings and their bias have proven irresistable to journalists and the popular press and I ...[?] the epic quest for water. Now, in 1990 Life Magazine produced a special issue, which some of you may have seen, cataloging 100 people, 100 Americans, who had most affected American history in the 20th century. Mulholland was one of those chosen, the engineer who moved a river and made the desert bloom, that article said and a New York journalist, however, in that good old ...[?] attitude was quick to snipe that Mulholland's presence on the list seemed a bit strained and that probably constituted a

sop to the hinter lands. (laughter) The provincialism of the east coast is truly remarkable, I mean they just don't get it, well, I guess the one's who get it have moved out here but, (laughing), the one's who stayed behind seem oblivious. Now, through the years I've tried to remain cool about the things I read and by and large I remain successful. But for academic and for my own purposes of starting in the 1950's when I was a graduate student at Berkeley, I began to collect material from my grandfather, I didn't know I'd ever write anything but through the last 40, the last 40 plus years I have really collected some amazing items in journals and popular press about an ever more fantastic saga of water stealing, land robbery, illicit millions and corrupt manipulations by a sinister shadow government. Once, in the midst, one of these even triggered an impulse to correct a national publication, it was 1977, Time Magazine had published one of its periodic feature pieces, this one of L.A. and on its phenomenal post World War II growth. Now the, now I found ...[?] publications and many national magazines, that the more you know about a subject, the more mistakes you can find. When I don't know very much about the subject I swallow everything but when I know something I find mistakes. This particular issue of Time, by skewing historic facts, had managed to suggest that General Harrison Grey Otis and Harry Chandler of the Los Angeles Times were the chief ...[?] of the city and were getting credit of almost everything except the creation of the Pacific Ocean. And then several dubious claims, with one that Harry Chandler had been the prime mover in the buliding of the Aqueduct and that's what set me off because in 1903 when the ideas for the Aqueduct and bringing water down from Owens Valley first got dealt with, Harry Chandler was still the assistant general manager of the L.A. Times and years away from his ...[?] to power in urban policy, he had very little to do with the beginning of the Aqueduct project except to attend Chamber of Commerce meeting when they were boosting the project. So I wrote a letter to the editor of the Time protesting the inaccuracies in the article and I also requested that credit should be given to ...[?], former mayor of Los Angeles for having first conceived the tapping of the Owens River as a source of water for the city. In due course I received a letter from "Time" Magazine acknowledging that it had been mistaken about the Aqueduct subject and defensively added that it's information had been gained from various sources, and I quote, all of whom are considered first rate, in so far as the history of Los Angeles is concerned. Time never revealed it's wonderful sources to me, my letter was never printed in it's magazine, ...[?] remained unnamed, so the mistakes and distortions of that issue have stood, not only undisturbed but now have been repeated so often by subsequetial journalists that they pass for undisputed fact. Today I estimate that of the voluminous literature that exists concerning the history of the Owens Valley and water in Southern California, that perhaps 50% is reliable while the remainder, based largely on secondary and often dubious sources, such as I've just told you, could be consigned to the fiction department. Very little on the subject has changed in the popular press in the last 30 years except that

the strokes seem to grow broader and cruder. The most recent exponent of the above mentioned "Time" version of history was Joan ...[?] who a few years ago seemed to be kind of the deligated authority on West Coast matters in the "New Yorker" Magazine, that is, until ...[?] Brown took over the editorship and is doing other rather interesting and sometimes dubious things with that venerable magazine. ...[?] pronouncement, ...[?]'s good on Hollywood but she should learn to, when she gets beyond La Cienga and Malibu she wanders in to some pretty, she's pretty weak. Her pronouncements on the historic past of L.A. at times have acheived absurdity. For instance, she wrote in 1990, and this is her sentence, the extent to which Los Angeles is literally invented by the L.A. Times and it's owners, Harrison Grey Otis and his descendents in the Chandler Family, remains hard for people in less recent parts of the country to fully apprehend. Well, it's not so easy for people in my parts either, whatever less recent parts of the country are, I really, I ...[?] over that for quite awhile, I don't know what a less recent part is but anyway. Without in any way minimizing the impact of Otis and Chandler on the history of the city, it's been enormous, but it's been distorted. I would suggest that we need less simple-minded views of the city's history and I won't live long enough, probably, to see a really first rate history of Los Angeles written, it will happen someday but it won't happen yet. That's why historical society's like you and your members could do small jobs, but very valuable jobs like Austin Conover's "Toluca Lake", are invaluable because they will become the source material for future serious historians because I was saying to someone history is largely a matter of creating, finishing a jigsaw puzzle, you think you have a picture but there's always pieces missing, until you can find some of the missing pieces you don't, you haven't solved the puzzle, you haven't painted the full picture. Now I want to say, another thing about history that journalists and pop writer, have, in the same period, I'm talking about, fallen in love with Raymond Chandler and in their eagerness to recreate the history of LA in his, in the image of his novels, have produced some wildy inflammed tabloid journalism with a tough guy stance. Among others, one, some of which seemed to create my grandfather as a kind of a mafia grandfather. One appeared in the L.A. Weekly and was subsequently reprinted in a journal for the Southern California Library for Social Studies Research, the title of that piece was called "Fresh Meat for Bill Mulholland or how I learned to love the Owens Valley Water Wars", it was accompanied by an unsmiling Mulholland in a black Fidora with a cigar jutting from his mouth, fair enough he wore black Fidora hats and did smoke cigars but to insure that the reader would not miss the villianous nature of this man, the caption simply read, and this is the total caption "Mulholland: Those hooded flinty eyes, grim, vindictive mouth." Now, two years earlier in 1988, L.A. Magazine, Los Angeles Magazine, published another sensational scare piece, maybe for Halloween, in October, that was called "Darkness Descends on the City of the Angels." Now it's author, ...[?], in order to demonstrate his thesis, that the city has ever been a sink of municipal corruption, used as his examples ...[?]

corruptness, the days of theft of the Owens Valley Water and the greening of the San Fernando Valley and the making of illicit millions by the fore fathers of some of the richest movers and shakers in our community today. Well this is, you know, this is the sort of accusation, it's like trying to answer the question, When did you stop beating your wife? In order to answer it, you have to become complex and nobody wants to stand around and hear a complicated answer to a simple accusation. So this tabloid story of water theivery and crooked land deals, ...[?] yet, I've just come back from Northern California and they all believe it up there, and with no shred of documented evidence and relying chiefly upon coincidence, old rumors, and heresay, many have come to believe this and of course, the fullest bloom of this muck-raking, kind of dime novel, detective school of history is found in the purely fictional melodramatic movie, "Chinatown", 1979. Which has come to be regarded by many of the misinformed and unenlightened as a kind of documentary work on the history of L.A. I knew one very pleasant, reasonably intelligent young woman, who I meet, bumped into and she said "Oh, I've just seen the most wonderful movie, it taught me so much about the history of Los Angeles, I said, I knew what was coming, "Chinatown", and I said, well, what did you learn?, I was, What did you learn?. Well, that stopped her for a minute and she said, well, I guess it showed how our water is connected to organized crime. Now, I can understand that a lay person can go the movies and think he's had a history lesson, I think that when I was 16 I believed I'd seen "Gone With the Wind" so I didn't have to read about the Civil War, the movies have that seductive quality and it's something that we're all going to have to live with, especially those that take history seriously but it, I'm considerably sobered when a reporter for the New York Times also seems to believe in the movies, so on May 1st, 1991 I read a lead piece on the subject of city water systems which singled out, ...[?] the New York Times, singled out L.A. as a horrible example of over exploitation ...[?] and to substantiate its case shamelessly sighted "Chinatown" as the work, quote - which chronicles how the city seized control of water to which it had no right.- (pause) These are very hard accusations to combat. I feel for the Kennedy family, regardless of one's political feelings, they have a movie like Oliver Stone's Kennedy out there or the recent movie about Nixon, it's very hard to combat a mass entertainment which is easy to swallow and is always over simplified, though I won't go on further, I think I've made my point. And in my forty years of clipping collection I've ...[?] a great mass of material which makes me better understand how these things came to be believed. They derived from a very few sources but journalists don't, aren't historians, journalists have to write on a quick deadline and so they grab the closet secondary material that fits their purposes and print it. Unfortunately they're frequently believed and that leaves a big job for the historian to come along and to correct the past, happening in amore responsible way. I finally came to the conclusion through the years, about my grandfather, that the famous historian called Becker, once wrote, the Protestant may love Luther, the Catholic may hate him, but they

would agree that Luther is important for the Reformation. So love him or hate him, William Mulholland was important to the history of Los Angeles and is therefore worthy of historic attention that as a result of these stories he's also in danger of becoming mythologized, and once a big lie is put in place it's very hard to budge. I don't want to go but I'd like to say to all of you who follow history, keep always an open mind, a skeptical mind and read everything you can find because it's fascinating and it tells us a lot about humanity, not always good but it certainly ...[?]. I'm currently, I'm going to break off a little bit because I want to tell you about my book, which I have finished and which will be published someday, let's hope we all live long lives (laughs) so you can.....(END OF TAPE (Side 1))

SIDE 2

Mulholland: That's a long story in itself, and I have come to feel that I was always told in the family that the worst enemy the Department of Water and Power had

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Unfinished